

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 8
Issue 2 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 9

November 2004

Comprehensive Action Against Landmines in Ecuador

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Recommended Citation

Leal, Guillermo (2004) "Comprehensive Action Against Landmines in Ecuador," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol8/iss2/9>

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COMPREHENSIVE ACTION AGAINST LANDMINES IN ECUADOR



Preparing for stockpile destruction.

Background

During the conflict of 1995 between Ecuador and Peru, a number of minefields were sown along the disputed border area. Although statistics concerning the problem have been difficult to obtain, anti-personnel mines represent a serious threat to the local populations. Many inhabitants have been forced to alter their traditional agricultural lifestyles as well as other daily activities such as cattle ranching, hunting and fishing.

Following the signing of the peace agreement on October 26, 1998, the process began of outlining the disputed border between both countries. Demining activities were carried out in two phases during this initial process. The first phase consisted of clearing the location where the border markers were being placed. The second phase consisted of clearing the apex of the square kilometer of Twinza, the same one that, in accordance with the common declarations of the presidents of the guarantor countries of the Rio de Janeiro Protocol, was handed over by the government of Peru to the government of Ecuador.

Ecuador ratified the Ottawa Convention on April 20, 1999, and through Executive Decree No. 1297 of September 22, 1999, created the "Demining Center of Ecuador" (CENDESMI for its initials in Spanish) composed of national authorities with the responsibility of establishing and developing the Mine Action Program.

On March 19, 2001, an agreement was signed in Quito between the government of the Republic of Ecuador and the General Secretariat of the Organization of American States concerning the Comprehensive Action Against Anti-personnel Mines in Ecuador (AICMA-EC). The objective of the program is

to strengthen the national institutional and technical capacity through consultation in locating, registering and destroying anti-personnel mines, providing special equipment and supplies, training for mine risk education campaigns, demining training, and assistance in the rehabilitation and productive reintegration into society of mine victims.

Victim Assistance

Since its initiation, the program has aimed at attending to the needs of landmine victims in affected communities that lack social security benefits. Assistance includes transportation from their communities to rehabilitation centers, nourishment, lodging, prostheses, physical and psychological rehabilitation, and the necessary medicine required throughout their treatment.

The Impact Surveys that have been completed have registered six mine incidents in which eight civilians were involved. These people have received assistance through the program in accordance with their specific needs, including medical assistance and materials and equipment that have assisted their socio-economic reintegration.

In a joint effort by the Minister of Defense of Ecuador and AICMA, a scholarship was provided to Cpl. Wellington Quintón, a landmine victim, to study technical issues concerning prosthetics and orthotics for three years at the University of Don Bosco in the Republic of El Salvador. He began his studies in January 2003 and is currently completing his fourth semester.

Mine Risk Education (MRE) Campaign

The MRE program has as an objective to not only reduce the risk of injury or death by promoting safe behavior, but also to provide solutions to high-risk behavior that is observed in some affected communities. In the case of Ecuador, it is important to highlight the double benefit that is obtained from the participation of affected communities in this activity. The members of the community learn about the dangers of anti-personnel mines, and where no mine registry exists, the communities are the principal source of information for locating mined areas and items of unexploded ordnance.



Helena Yáñez and Wilyam Lucar, representatives of the National Authorities of Ecuador and Peru, respectively, analyze the situation in the minefields on the common border together with the Commanders of the Demining Units.

Organizations Participating in Mine Action Program:

- **Demining Center of Ecuador (CENDESMI):** Coordinates national efforts, plans and directs the National Humanitarian Demining Plan, and develops the national standards that regulate the execution of demining operations in Ecuador.
- **General Demining Command (CGD):** According to its operational plans, directs and supervises humanitarian demining operations that are carried out by the Regional Demining Commands, ensuring that the work is executed in accordance with national and international standards. This is implemented with military personnel of the Ecuadorian army, which provides the deminers.
- **The Comprehensive Action Against Anti-Personnel Mines Program in Ecuador (AICMA-EC):** Participates in the design and execution of the Program in coordination with CENDESMI and administers donated funds in accordance with donor requirements and general norms for the functioning of the Organization of American States. The Program also arranges for the training of deminers in coordination with the beneficiary country.
- **The Assistance Mission for Mine Clearance in South America (MARMINAS):** Assists AICMA-EC in ensuring, through international monitors, that the demining operations are being carried out utilizing organization and technical detection and destruction material and techniques that are reliable and adequate in accordance with security standards.

The mine risk education campaigns have relied on the participation of the Ecuadorian Red Cross and members of the Ecuadorian army, who together with CENDESMI and AICMA-EC design the communication strategy for each campaign. The audiences selected for the campaigns that have been executed include local authorities, media, as well as the affected populations directly. The techniques employed have been local radio and "person-

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to-person" methods that illustrate interpersonal communication. This permits the campaign to reach out to more than 37,000 inhabitants of the province of El Oro and Loja, located in the south of Ecuador.

Destruction of Stockpiled Mines

Ecuador, like other states in Central and South America, is committed to achieving an anti-personnel mine-free hemisphere. This aspiration became a challenge and was the reason for Ecuador's destruction of 260,302 stockpiled anti-personnel mines, fulfilling the "Managua Challenge." Consequently, Ecuador assisted the Third Meeting of State Signatories of the Ottawa Convention as a stockpile-free country. Likewise, Ecuador transferred 1,664 mines to the United States in order to investigate and develop new and safe destruction and detection techniques.

Ecuador has reduced its stockpiled mines to 3,970, which will be used for training and the development of detection and destruction techniques.

Desminado Humanitario

Impact Surveys

Now that CENDESMI is ready to hand over the cleared areas in the Province of El Oro and Loja to the local authorities and to the population in general, it is worth mentioning the importance of the impact survey as the first step towards the successful humanitarian demining of an affected territory. The surveys in these provinces identified 38 mined areas with 1,272 anti-personnel mines affecting approximately 62,000 square meters of terrain dedicated to cattle ranching and rice and fruit (lemons, mangos and mandarins, among others) cultivations. Additionally at risk were approximately 36,000 people that lack knowledge concerning the threat of anti-personnel mines and the safe behavior that should be practiced. Eight anti-personnel mine victims were identified and registered during this activity.

Currently, work is being carried out in information collection and verification concerning the dangerous areas in the provinces



Victor Solano, a 22-year-old survivor of a grenade, lost his right arm and is seen here in occupational therapy.

of Morona Santiago and Zamora Chinchipe. The results will define the socio-economic impact of mines within Ecuadorian territory and establish a chronology of work that will orient the demining operations to reach the objective of a landmine-free Ecuador.

According to the information collected in the province of Morona Santiago, the national authorities reported in their Article 7 report of May 31, 2004, that there are various objectives. These include mines placed by Ecuador on Peruvian territory with a territorial extension of approximately 56,005 square meters and 1,090 anti-personnel mines.

Technical Surveys

In order to carry out the surveys, national authorities activated two Demining Units with 50 deminers who worked simultaneously in the provinces of Loja and El Oro under the direction of the Regional Demining Command "TARQUI." The technical surveys in the Province of El Oro were completed by the end of December 2003. One hundred eighty-six anti-personnel mines and 59 anti-tank mines were destroyed and an area of 46,419 square meters was cleared. The General Demining Command plans to conclude the technical studies in the province of Loja by the end of July, whose partial results show the destruction of 54 anti-personnel mines, two antitank mines, as well as the clearance of 24,687 square meters.

Information Management

In January 2002, the Center for Information Management was established in

the offices of AICMA-EC, with the purpose of assisting CENDESMI in planning, coordinating and directing the National Humanitarian Demining Plan. The center also provides decision-making support to the national authorities and supporting the General Demining Command on operational issues.

The Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) installed the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA). Field reports were prepared and standardized, serving as the essential base for information processing and for the development of procedure manuals, as well as training of personnel from the General Demining Command in information collection.

Joint Work Ecuador-Peru

On June 13, 2002, in the "Centro Histórico Turístico" hall in the district of Aguas Verdes, Department of Tumbes, the first meeting on technical coordination between the representatives of the Armies of Ecuador and Peru was held. The objective was a dedication to humanitarian demining in coordination with AICMA-OAS. This first meeting was carried out professionally, in the spirit of fraternity and camaraderie, assuring continued dialogue and cooperation between the armies of both countries concerning humanitarian demining. The meeting concluded with the signing of a memorandum of understanding. It contains eight points covering issues such as exchange of information concerning the presence of anti-personnel mines, the development of joint reconnaissance and demining operations, the execution of coordinated MRE campaigns and, if required, the sharing of evacuation and emergency plans, among other points.

According to the Memorandum, the Commanders of the Demining Units of Ecuador and Peru decided that the execution of work in two dangerous areas located very near the international limit would be carried out in a joint and coordinated manner. The mission would employ their respective demining units, encompassed in the Memorandum of Understanding No 2. On September 10, 2003, the government of Peru, through Supreme Resolution No 314, authorized the entrance of Ecuadorian deminers to partici-

pate in joint demining operations. These would fulfill the intention of the Humanitarian Demining Commanders of both countries.

On December 15, 2003, the work for these two objectives was completed. This work provided a number of great lessons and demonstrated to the international community a team effort worthy of imitating, also expressing the pride of the demining units of Ecuador and Peru. Recently the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of both countries transmitted a joint media bulletin, informing the public about the completion of humanitarian demining operations on the common border, which includes the province of El Oro in Ecuador and the department of Tumbes in Peru.

Challenges

Demining in the provinces of Morona Santiago and Zamora Chinchipe, where the geographic characteristics of the mined area include the presence of vegetation, jungle climate and terrain, and vast distances to supply and medical centers, will constitute a challenge for the program in the next few years. Fundamental for demining in these provinces is the Impact Survey with field reports, which are currently in the comparison and evaluation phase. The trustworthiness and precision of this information depends in great part on the effectiveness, efficiency, security and management of the conduction and execution of humanitarian demining in these difficult areas. Carrying out joint operations between Ecuador and Peru facilitates and minimizes the threat represented by the Amazon Jungle and guarantees the accomplishment of the objective of liberating the country from the scourge of anti-personnel mines.

* Photos c/o author.

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